

Stephanie Doss

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The House on H Street

The woman in the black veil sat in the courtroom stone-faced, sure of the verdict and the fate of the defendants. Despite the intentions of the councilors to give the best defense for the clients, public opinion and evidence weighed too heavily against them.

The defendants were on trial for a serious crime: murder. If convicted, they faced life in prison or the gallows. The woman in the veil, Mary, knew each one of them, as they had often visited or stayed at her home. They were the friends of her son, a son she was once proud of but who had brought great sadness to her life through his relationship with these men.

The story began when Mary moved to Washington, D.C., with her son, John, Jr., and her daughter, Anna, to live and rent out a boardinghouse Mary owned with her late husband. John Sr. had been a competent business man but also a reckless, gambling drunk who had left Mary in a state of heavy debt she had barely managed to escape. Now she wanted a fresh start.

The more recent trouble for her family started when John Jr. met another young man named John, much more prominent and famous than he. This other John was dashing, intelligent, and well connected, and at first, Mary had been pleased that her son had made such a well-mannered friend. It was no secret Mary's family, originally from Maryland, supported the Confederate cause, and they often shared their sympathies with their new guest. However, more young men soon began to come to the house asking for Mary's son, and none were so charming as John. Occasionally, she allowed them to stay the night when her son requested, but she began to disapprove of these new friends and worried about her son's secretive activities. Often her son

and his friends would go into a separate room and converse for hours, though she didn't know about what. Though she supported her son's involvement in the Confederate cause, she did not trust her son's new friends and feared he could get into a dangerous situation.

Eventually the truth came out – her son and his friends were planning a kidnapping. Though she worried for her son's safety, she didn't fight him on his plan because he assured her it was for the greater Confederate cause, for they were kidnapping an important Union leader they could hold for ransom or trade for Confederate prisoners. After John Jr. and the other young men had left, Mary wept and prayed for his safe return.

Several hours later, her son and the others did return, but their kidnapping attempt had been thwarted – the deed would have to be planned for another time. Yet as the days passed, Mary did not see another attempt take place. Instead, her son found another occupation as a Confederate letter courier. He began to leave for weeks at a time, first to Richmond then elsewhere, to carry letters illegally for the Confederate government. Although he officially remained unemployed, Mary felt better knowing her son was secretly acting in the service of a cause they believed in. Though her son was absent, his friend John continued to call at their house and seemed angry his kidnapping plan was not coming to fruition. In the interest of her son, Mary was friendly to John when he visited but could do little to help him.

On a chilly day in mid-April, Mary decided she needed to take a trip to the tavern she also owned just outside of Washington, D.C., to conduct some business. She asked her son's friend and her boarder, Louis, to accompany her on the trip. While Louis went to get the buggy, John appeared at Mary's door. He asked her if she was going to the tavern today, and when she replied that she was, he requested she deliver a package for him to the owner of the tavern. Since the package seemed harmless, and since John was her son's friend, she agreed. She knew that her

son had hidden some other items at the tavern to be used for the kidnapping and thought this package was related. Little did she know of John's real plan, which was to be enacted that very evening.

Mary was tired after she returned from her trip to the tavern, which was hours from the city, and she also worried for her son. Though he had sent her a letter recently claiming he was in Montreal, John had implied her son was still involved in the kidnapping plot and would need Mary's help. For the rest of the night, although the city was rejoicing in the streets at the end of the Civil War, Mary stayed at home.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, several officers appeared at the door of Mary's boarding house. When she answered the door, they asked for her son. Filled with a sense of dread, she told them what she knew of his whereabouts and revealed that his last letter had been sent from Montreal. They also asked about several of his friends. They were all wanted for murder. Though clearly unsatisfied, the officers were forced to leave, and Mary was safe . . . for now.

Only a few days later, the officers returned, this time claiming they had testimony from a neighbor that suspicious men had been at the boardinghouse after the murder had occurred. Though Mary had no idea what they were talking about, the officers demanded that everyone in the boarding house be brought in for questioning. As they were about to leave, a knock sounded at the door. An officer answered and found a disheveled-looking man holding a shovel. Upon seeing the armed men, he immediately attempted to leave, claiming he had the wrong house. Yet the officers wouldn't let him go that easily. They questioned him and he admitted he had been looking for Mary's boarding house, claiming she had hired him to dig a gutter for her, and that he simply wanted to ask when he should come. The officers asked if she recognized the man.

Squinting in the dark, it was hard for Mary to tell with her poor vision. Though he looked vaguely like a man she had seen before, she couldn't be sure considering he was dressed in shabby, dirty clothes, and that she had never hired a laborer to dig a gutter for her. She answered she had never seen him before. Because of his suspicious behavior, he was arrested anyway. However, Mary had, in fact, seen him before . . . in her own house in the company of her son, but dressed as a pastor. In fact, the man Mary had welcomed into her home was wanted in connection with the most famous murder in history!

But Mary and her son's real fate in this conspiracy is THE REST OF THE STORY.

Mary sat in the courtroom and reflected on the events of the past year. Her son was still missing; he hadn't returned after he learned he was wanted for conspiracy to commit murder because of his collaborations with the killers. Though he had not been present to participate in the murder, his association with the assassins was enough to pursue him. Silent and contemplative, with a veil hiding her face, Mary was aware of the journalists watching and reporting her every move. For this was no ordinary murder trial . . . it was the trial of Abraham Lincoln's assassins. The verdict was read: everyone guilty, some receiving life sentences, while those the jury believed were most central to the crime were sentenced to the death penalty.

The execution of the assassins was a public affair. The nation had been in a state of mourning for their slain president and wanted to see justice done swiftly. Mary was present at the execution as well. However, she did not stand on the hill below the gallows, but amongst the criminals. She too had been convicted of conspiring to kill President Lincoln for welcoming her son's friend John into her home . . . John Wilkes Booth.

Mary would also become famous for something else. For the woman walking toward the gallows that day was Mary Surratt . . . the first woman executed in the United States. And now you know THE REST OF THE STORY.

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